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ABSTRACT

As classroom teachers progress through their teaching careers, they may encounter stressful transitional periods. At about the tenth year, they decide whether to remain in the occupation and which teaching situation they should consider permanently. At about the twentieth year, they may evaluate their careers and revitalize themselves. There appear to be four major transitions in a teaching career: the first year, the tenth year, the twentieth year, and retirement. Each transition may result in the teachers' complete reevaluation of personal and professional goals. The teacher educator should assist the teacher in personal insight and self acceptance. The teacher's use of the same teaching methods over several decades may result in an inability on the part of the teacher to understand the changing values and intentions of students. In an effort to help teachers understand the stages and transitions in their teaching careers, a graduate course has been developed at the University of Houston. Case studies are provided to elicit a subjective understanding of the personal and emotional aspects of midcareer crisis at various transitional stages. (Author/JN)

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Stress in Teachers' Midcareer Transitions:

A Role for Teacher Education

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Abstract

As classroom teachers progress through their careers, they may encounter stressful transitional periods at approximately the tenth and twentieth years of their careers. At about the tenth year they decide whether to remain in the occupation and which teaching situation to settle down in. At about the twentieth year they may evaluate their careers and revitalize themselves. A graduate course called Teacher Career Development has been developed to enhance the potential for growth inherent in transitional phases.

Teachers and teacher educators are becoming increasingly aware of the stresses inherent in the occupation of teaching. Educational journals discuss the sources of stress in the condition of our schools and society, and workshops are held to teach stress-reduction techniques. There is, however, a frequently overlooked kind of stress which affects career teachers. This is the stress inherent in the natural course of personal and professional development.

As teachers enter the profession, teach for thirty or forty years, and retire, they encounter certain stressful transitional periods in their development. The purpose of this paper is to review the concept of teacher career development, to describe the tenth year and twentieth year career transitions and their accompanying stresses, and to show how one graduate course in Teacher Career Development enhanced the potential for growth inherent in the transitional phases.

Two Teachers Under Stress

Mrs. Carolyn Gordon (pseudonym) is an attractive, earnest second grade teacher, wife of a corporate vice-president, and mother of three bright and beautiful children. She went into teaching right out of college, taught for two years, and after taking a six-year break to start her family, returned to the classroom three years ago. Because of her husband's transfers, she has taught in five different schools. Carolyn thrives on teaching and has a strong commitment to education. She prides herself on being a humanist, and has more than once felt the conflict between the regimentation of school learning

and the internally motivated growth which she would like to nurture in her students. Her classroom, with its art center, study bubble and book nook, reflects her respect for children's individuality.

At thirty-three, Carolyn is filling the roles she has always anticipated and hoped for, and yet lately she has been vaguely searching for something. The conflict between her goals and the school's suddenly seems sharper. Although she expects to have a career as a classroom teacher, she has recently felt a nagging fear of becoming an "old teacher," one who accepts the institutional status quo, uses the same lesson plans every year, and never questions herself. Carolyn Gordon doesn't talk about these feelings; to have these thoughts seems disloyal to her calling.

Julia Schaefer (pseudonym) is forty. She has been teaching junior high language arts for eighteen years, fourteen of these in her present district. Her husband, children and parents have always been supportive of her teaching. Julia entered the profession full of ideas and ideals. She sometimes meets frustration, but tells herself that her job is more civilized than the cut-throat business world. Once in a while, she feels that special feeling of success; all of her trials and tribulations then pale in the glow of her elation.

As the years have passed, Julia has seen her friends in the business world, both men and women, attain status and wealth. Certainly, she has good benefits, long vacation and a feeling that she is making a contribution to society, but lately she has begun to wonder: "Is that enough?"

Julia has approached the district's professional growth courses eagerly with the goal of keeping abreast of the changing educational scene. But

something happened. At first, she thought it happened overnight, a need for some kind of change. Finally, she has realized that it is time for some self-evaluation. Is she as effective as she used to be? Is this really what she wants to do for the rest of her life? She quickly figures out that she will be teaching at least fourteen more years before she can retire at age fifty-five with thirty-two years of experience. She's about half way there! What next? She's not sure what her options are.

Carolyn Gordon, Julia Schaefer and many other career teachers are in periods of transition. They are midcareer classroom teachers with decisions to make about their professional lives. In the end, they make these decisions either consciously or unconsciously, but chances are that they will fail to think of their careers as wholes, with structure, movement, and direction. They experience stress, but will probably not attribute it to the pressure of making career decisions.

Six Challenges to a Tacit Assumption

The sameness of teaching over the decades of a career has long been a tacit assumption among teachers and teacher educators. Prospective teachers complete their undergraduate education, become certified, and are sent forth, with limited supervision, inservice programs, or graduate education to keep them current. It is becoming increasingly apparent that a teaching career is not one great plateau, but a varied terrain with many possible paths and a few shared thickets, swamps, mountains and meadows. Teacher educators

have an important role to play in helping teachers survey and travel the terrain of their careers. We can help teachers challenge the tacit assumption in six ways.

1. We can make teachers aware that they will experience stages in their careers. Recent studies of teachers suggest that a teaching career has a structure, and that at particular points there are characteristic activities, attitudes, and concerns. (Burden, 1979; Newman, 1980; Peterson, 1978)

2. There appear to be four major transitions in a teaching career: the first year, approximately the tenth year, approximately the twentieth year, and retirement. The transition may be in an intense consideration of an imminent career decision, or a gradual shift in one's attitude toward teaching. The teacher educator's role is to promote teachers' insight and self-acceptance through their transitional periods.

3. The stages of a teaching career to some degree reflect the stages of adult development as explained by contemporary psychologists. Whereas adult life used to be partitioned into youth, middle age, and old age, researchers such as Levinson (1978) and Gould (1978) now posit a greater number of stages, each with its own personal, social and occupational tasks. Both teachers and teacher educators are just beginning to be aware of the implications of these concepts for long term teaching development.

4. We can make teachers aware of the impact of contemporary history on their careers. Although teachers with many years of experience will talk about how students have changed over the years, it is often furtive or defensive talk. Let's have teachers read studies of America's changing values. Teachers can be encouraged to talk openly about the professional

adjustments they have made in response to the new kinds of students who fill their classrooms. They can be shown how teachers from other eras have also faced this legitimate and predictable professional challenge. Similarly, they can view their participation in such movements as consolidation, desegregation or education of the handicapped as part of the shape of their classroom careers.

5. Teacher educators can facilitate career-long development by confronting the phenomenon of the teacher image in American culture. Are teachers aware at a conscious level of how teachers are portrayed on television, film, and the news media? Do they realize what kinds of teachers populate the books most read by children and adolescents? Have they ever reflected on the characteristics of cartoon and comic strip teachers? These cultural images of teachers influence teachers' individual self-images throughout their careers.

6. Finally, teacher educators can help teachers examine the occupational characteristics of teaching. Low pay, no advancement while remaining a classroom teacher, little recognition for merit, a predominantly female occupation, short hours, long vacation -- the value of these features to individual teachers frequently changes over the course of a teaching career.

A Course in Teacher Career Development

In an effort to help teachers examine the stages and transitions in their teaching careers, a graduate course called Teacher Career Development has been created by Katherine Newman at the University of Houston. The purpose

of the course is to have teachers confront each of the six challenges and to perceive the structure of their own careers. The major course content and assignments are listed below:

1. First Professional Autobiography. During the first week of the course, each student writes an autobiography which gives an account of his or her teaching career. The autobiography starts with the decision to become a teacher, includes a work history and professional changes, and ends with a statement of plans for the future.

2. Adult Development. The class reads Levinson's Seasons of a Man's Life (1978), Gould's Transformations (1978), and Buhler's "The Course of Human Life as a Psychological Problem" (1968), noting the adult stages of human development and evaluating personal experience in the light of these readings.

3. Occupation Characteristics of Teaching. Dreeban's The Nature of Teaching (1970) and Lortie's Schoolteacher (1975) provide the basis for the class to examine how occupational structures affect the careers of teachers.

4. Teacher Image in Society. Reading Gerbner's "Teacher Image and the Hidden Curriculum" (1972-73) and Winick's "The Teacher on Film: The Awful Truth?" (1978) brings a recognition of the negative cultural stereotypes and their effect on teachers, students, and parents.

5. Impact of History. Using Getzels' "The School and the Acquisition of Values" (1978), and relying especially on the older teachers taking the course, the class reflects on the effects of historical events and trends on a teaching career.

6. Stages and Transitions in a Teaching Career. The stages of professional development are explored through such sources as Ryan et al.'s Biting the Apple (1980), Newman's "Stages in an Unstaged Occupation" (1980), and Peterson's "Career Patterns of Secondary School Teachers: An Exploratory Interview Study of Retired Teachers " (1978).

7. Teachers' Written Accounts. Students read and report on published autobiographical accounts by teachers, such as Nathan's Tales of a Teacher (1956) and Rousculp's Chalk Dust on My Shoulder (1969).

8. Teacher Interviews. Each student in the class conducts a series of intensive interviews with a teacher who has been in the classroom at least twenty years. The interview is started with the request: "Tell me the story of your career."

9. Second Professional Autobiography. Based on the course readings, discussion and introspection, each student either revises or writes a new account of his or her career.

The course in Teacher Career Development is an opportunity for teachers in transition to examine their careers and the decisions involved in their turning points. In the next sections, we look at two turning points in detail, and show how teachers in those transitions gained insights through the activities in Teacher Career Development.

The Tenth Year Transition

Teachers in their late twenties or early thirties who have been in teaching for several years are likely to be experiencing an important midcareer transition (Newman, 1980). Their transitional tasks at first appear to be

fairly straightforward. They must make a decision about whether to remain in classroom teaching, and which district, grade, and/or subject to settle down in. The structure of the teaching occupation forces decisions at this time. Because school districts tend to give a newly-hired experienced teacher credit for only a few years in another district, teachers must decide in their late twenties where to settle and accrue retirement benefits.

Professionally, these teachers have had a busy decade. They have probably made frequent changes in schools, grades, or subjects in an attempt to find the most desirable situation. Many women have taken breaks to start a family. Both men and women have begun graduate school (Newman, 1980). Since their fifth year of teaching they have felt professionally mature, self-confident, and competent in instructing and relating to students (Burden, 1979). They have few doubts about their ability to succeed as classroom teachers. In their personal lives, these teachers have found a desirable place to live, and have probably married and taken on family responsibilities. They have been engaged in what Levinson (1978) calls the paradoxical tasks of the mid-twenties: exploration, both vocational and personal, and the creation of stability.

Literature in adult development suggests that the period around age thirty has its unique problems. At this stage of development, the men studied by Levinson felt a sense of urgency to end their exploration and revise the structures of their personal and occupational lives. For over half of the forty men studied, this period of self-assessment and change proved painful.

Gould (1978) described adult development in terms of the false childhood beliefs which must be overcome at progressive stages in order for continued growth to take place. Between the approximate ages of 28 and 34, men and

women confront the deep, but false, inner assumption that "reality of my life is not complicated." Having realized that the complete happiness they expected in their twenties has not materialized, they feel unrest or disillusionment. The challenge in this stage is to recognize the complexity of both the inner self and the outer world; in reality neither is very simple or controllable.

How are these adult stages manifest in teachers' career decisions? Men and women with families to support ask themselves whether they want to live on the comparatively low pay of teaching with so little chance for the economic upgrading of the occupation. If they continue as classroom teachers, they will sacrifice upward job mobility. They will always be subordinate to administrators. They will stay in one district as long as they are dependent on their own career for retirement benefits. On the other hand, there is security in teaching. There is little likelihood of being fired, and no pressure to "advance." Pay raises are predictable. Teachers must make decisions about their financial futures, decisions which were not urgent to them as first or second year teachers.

Women today have an additional choice. They now question their previous assumption that teaching was the only real career choice they had. They realize that options are opening up. They wonder whether teaching is attractive to them because they lack the courage to try alternatives, or because teaching is simply compatible with their family obligations, or because they really love the work.

A choice to stay in classroom teaching is a choice to age as a teacher. Now teachers must confront their mental images of older teachers. From

popular culture they are bombarded with stereotypes of the older teacher: robot, devil, angel, nervous Nellie. Will they become one of these? Which one? None is desirable. Yet they already see elements of some of these stereotypes in themselves. Should they get out before they turn all the way?

Teachers ask themselves how much they enjoy the work itself. Many entered teaching because they found it personally rewarding to be with young people. After ten years they must decide whether the satisfaction from being with students and seeing them learn is deep enough to sustain them for another twenty years.

Teachers' choice of the district and school in which they would like to settle is of critical importance. In addition to considering the financial benefits offered by the district, teachers weigh the educational policies, curriculum, and approaches to discipline. More importantly, how comfortable do teachers feel with the students in that district. Are the race, socioeconomic level, and moral standards of the community acceptable to the teacher? Many teachers at this point in their careers have taught students from a variety of backgrounds. They have developed a sense of whom they prefer teaching, and must base their career choices partly on the conscious affirmation of that sense.

Teachers entered the occupation ten years ago with untried notions of self and job. In the early years they have explored, tested, matured. At this point the occupation demands that they make a choice about a long-term commitment. Simultaneously they feel a personal urge for more stability, the need to chart a long-range plan based on experience, self-knowledge, and

emerging goals. The influences on their decisions are complex. The time spent in recognizing, confronting and resolving questions of whether and where to remain in teaching is the tenth year transition.

One Teacher in the Tenth Year Transition

Carolyn Gordon, the teacher described in the introduction, was in the beginning of such a transition when she signed up for Teacher Career Development. She found the course, in her words, "clarifying, terrifying, and challenging."

The course was clarifying in that her teaching career, which had formerly seemed shapeless, now came clearly into focus when viewed through the lenses of teacher career stages and adult development. She realized how she had changed as a teacher since her first two years: she had become more flexible with the curriculum and more centered on meeting children's needs. Discipline had never been a problem, but she had become more accepting of the children in all kinds of interactions with them. She had learned to help the children manage themselves. Carolyn saw that her relationships with superiors were not what they were originally; she never used to question any of their criticism. Carolyn clearly saw that there had been movement and progression thus far in her career.

The understandings of adult development which she gained in the course partly accounted for its terrifying aspect. For the first time she consciously faced society's differing expectations for men's and women's careers. The thought that she might have unwittingly channeled herself in to a female occupation instead of actively choosing teaching shook the very foundation of her commitment. Was she really dedicated to teaching, or was she the

passive recipient of the cultural message that a woman's career is second to her family? After experiencing the initial shock of this realization, Carolyn moved fairly quickly on to affirming her commitment to teaching. Her realization that as a contemporary woman she indeed did have other career options further strengthened her allegiance to teaching.

The other terrifying insight which Carolyn gained in the course was not so easily settled. She became aware of the negative image of teachers portrayed in the media, teachers as either mindless or "know-it-all," either tyrants or pushovers. Carolyn began to search reality for positive images to counteract the stereotypes. She thought back to the teachers who had made a difference in her own life. Even these self-actualized teachers had gone along with the system, Carolyn mused; even they gave in to the mediocre school systems from which the negative stereotypes of teachers are perpetuated. Carolyn felt even more certain that the media image, as well as schools themselves, must become more positive.

Throughout the course Carolyn kept returning to her central question: What will I become as a teacher? Here was the challenge of the course: to develop her own role as a future teacher. She realized that to be a teacher she would have to find a way to live with the system. But would she have to become like her former teachers who, while admired, had failed to question the status quo? Carolyn had read about humanistic approaches to education and was in agreement with the underlying philosophy, but she needed a clear vision of a teacher-humanist. The assignment to read a teacher's auto-biography provided the opportunity. She went from Summerhill to Neill's Dominie books, and found there her master teacher. Here was a model for her teacher self. She formed a view of her future career in which develop-

ment from the early part of her career was coupled with the new commitments of the present.

Carolyn Gordon's transition was not complete. She had reached the turning point, pivoted, and had yet to go forward. Before her lay the task of implementing the new self. Still to be faced were repercussions in her family life from her answers to the transition questions. At the end of the course she concluded,

> It may or may not have been a coincidence that I began a combination of adult and career development turning points during this course. At times I feel almost overwhelmed by the crises presented by these transitions, but the course has shown me the opportunity of coming out a new, stronger person and a better teacher.

The Twentieth Year Transition

Classroom teachers in their late thirties and early forties have spent two decades in teaching. After the exploration and professional maturation of their twenties, and the questioning and renewed commitment of the tenth year transition, the teachers have spent the decade of their thirties without major career events. Most have been teaching in one school and have continued at the same grade level or subject. They have felt competent and confident, and any dissatisfactions have been due to transient circumstances, for example, an inadequate principal or a particularly unruly group of students (Newman, 1980). In their personal lives they have been paying the mortgage, raising their families, taking part in community affairs, and developing recreational pursuits. Levinson called the mid and late thirties a settling down period. The men in his study felt a strong need for stability in their home and occupational lives. They worked steadily toward their life goals.

The thirties are the still waters before the rapids. Around age forty, a major transition in life orientation takes place, say the psychologists. They disagree as to whether the transition is accurately termed a "crisis," but for many people the period is intense.

For teachers, the twentieth year transition is not as overt as the tenth year transition. No formal career decision is to be made. The transition would be easier if it hinged on a major decision, such as whether to remain in teaching or when to retire. Instead, the manifestation of teachers' midlife transitions seems to be apparent in a decline in satisfaction, and a determination to "get out of the rut" (Newman, 1980).

For the men in Levinson's study, the midlife transition was approximately from age 40 to 45. During that period they were involved in three major tasks. The first was to reappraise the past. They made a critical examination of how they were measuring up to the dreams and goals they had set for themselves in early adulthood. Insofar as they fell short, either in work or family, the second task was to modify their life structures. Third, the men experienced an intense period of individuation; the process of changing their relationship to self and external world. The process involved resolving four polarities. The men had to come to grips with oldness and youngness in themselves: they questioned whether they were obsolete, and felt the need to leave a legacy to humanity. They faced the polarity of the destructive and creative forces within themselves and society; the polarity of the masculine and feminine elements in themselves; the polarity of their urges for both attachment to and separateness from other human beings.

Gould suggested that the midlife decade falls between the ages of 35 and 45. It is the time to recognize the falseness of the childhood belief that there is no death or evil in the world. Adults at this stage feel the pressure of time. Old age and death can not be escaped by their loved ones or themselves. They have limited time to accomplish their goals.

When teachers at midlife come to assess their accomplishments, the characteristics of the occupation are acutely apparent. Those who have chosen a classroom teaching career have no advancement to show, no high salaries, no leaps in social status. When they think of their students as their accomplishments, they may feel satisfaction that so many students have learned, but students' success in school and in life is only minutely connected to any one teacher. How can teachers take substantial credit for students' ultimate success? So many teachers will never know what became of their students; the teacher can not hold up an "intangible product," as Dreeban (1970) calls it. Instead, teachers must rediscover the invisible inner satisfaction which comes from teaching young people.

As teachers enter midlife, they can not help but see that they have now taught an entire generation of school children. There has been a slow and subtle change in the way they relate to young people. No longer are they the youthful big sister or big brother or young parent to their students. Now they are the older parent. The generational shift is also apparent in their relationships with colleagues. The midlife teacher realizes that the teachers who were his age, i.e., middle age, when he began teaching have now all retired. He is now a full generation removed from the young men and women who are now entering the classroom and calling themselves his fellow teachers (Peterson, 1978).

The transition in which the teachers confront their own aging is complicated in teaching by the hand of history. In our modern future-shocked society, with its knowledge explosion, population shifts, sliding values, and vast uncertainties, the middle-age teachers discover either suddenly or gradually that classroom life has changed. Not only is school architecture

markedly different; not only has technology made new teaching tools available; not only has the old educational jargon been replaced; but also teachers feel that the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations of students have changed. Yet teachers feel it is more than that. Here is the teachers' inner transitional dilemma: what accounts for their new attitudes toward students -- differences in their school's youth, today's youth in general, or their own aging? It would be easy enough to blame a changing neighborhood or the changing society, but teachers are all too aware of the physical changes within them which forecast mortality. Whatever the cause, the result for many teachers at about age 40 is a decline in satisfaction with teaching.

With a shift in time sense, the teachers now think in terms of the number of years left until retirement rather than the number of years already spent in the classroom. They think about the routine of the past decade and seek means of revitalization. Some teachers see a positive and stimulating side in the new kind of student. For example, they see how to build on students' greater knowledge of worldly events gained from television, or they simply decide to enjoy the new informality in relationships. Other teachers change schools within the district, or switch grades believing that a new situation or another age group will offer additional interest and keep them learning.

One Teacher in the Twentieth Year Transition

Julia Schaefer was already aware that she was in a transition. For several years she had been feeling a growing need for "something" in her career. She had finally decided that a master's degree was that something. The degree, she figured, would yield two benefits in addition to the primary purpose of her gaining new knowledge about teaching. The degree would be a

professional challenge to her: she would have to make time to attend class, read assignments, write papers, and study for exams. The comprehensive examination would loom ambivalently as the final hurdle of the program. The thought of new horizons and new challenges was very appealing. The second benefit was that by being a student again she would identify more closely with her own students. What better way to understand the role of student than to become one, she thought.

Julia was well into her master's program when a major transition in her personal life occured. Her husband decided to move to Tulsa, and Julia decided to remain in Houston. Coincidentally, she signed up that week for the course in Teacher Career Development, and picked up her pen for the first assignment: to write a professional autobiography. As she thought over her career, she realized what sustenance she derived from her work. She saw changes in herself over the years, but recognized that the concern and involvement she had felt with children her first year of teaching was as strong for her now. As she came into class the second week and shared her autobiography, she announced, "Writing this paper made me realize why I can't follow my husband to Tulsa."

As the semester progressed, the effects of the divorce on her professional life emerged. Julia realized that she was no longer just teaching for personal satisfaction. She was now dependent on it as a source of income. A month later the principal asked her to remove the learning centers from her room and put the desks back into rows. Julia felt she had no choice but to comply.

As she read about the occupational characteristics of teaching she compared herself to some of her friends who had left teaching. They had

been excellent teachers but were now successful in the business world, compensated for their efforts, and recognized by their superiors. Was teaching worth it? Still, Julia believed in the profound dignity inherent in teaching. She strove to become more professional, i.e., organize her room, teach her lessons, cooperate with the principal. Now that teaching was a "real" job for her, a source of income, she would meet the standards. She aimed at greater competence in the classroom.

One day the principal appeared. Two of her students had complained about her class, and their parents had called him. When the parents, children and Julia sat down together, Julia asked what was wrong. "The work is too easy," one child said. "It used to be harder." "The work is too hard," the other countered. "It used to be easier." Julia was unable to draw out the specifics, but she knew the general dissatisfaction was significant. The next day she held a class meeting, and against her professional judgment, she told them about her divorce and the transition she was experiencing. The students reminded her of how she used to try out all the ideas she learned in graduate school; they missed that. The next day she received a letter from the class. "Dear Mrs. Schaefer, When you have a problem, tell us. We will be very understanding." Reading the note again, Julia experienced a flash of insight.

As part of the coursework, Julia immersed herself in the readings about adult development. It became more apparent to her what divorce meant in terms of her personal development. The life problems of her friends and colleagues seemed to fall into perspective also. Julia realized that her principal was but a few years away from retirement; no wonder he would not tolerate any perceived threats to the status quo. He wanted to retire, respected, from a stable situation.

Julia began to feel more comfortable about her own transitional phase. She realized she had attempted to hide its effects from her students; they had sensed that something was wrong, but they had only been able to express their concern by complaining about the class work. Julia saw that at this stage in her life she was redefining her relationships with students. Identifying with them by becoming a graduate student was good, but insufficient. She had thought that her new rapport with students should be one in which they could be human, but she would be professional. She discovered as she moved on in her midlife transition that she did not have to discard her former personalism with children. She could maintain, even enhance the closeness which she had felt earlier in her career, but from the perspective of a different stage in adult life. When, for the Teacher Career Development class, she interviewed a 55-year-old career teacher, she gained insight into the relationship between personal and professional life. She now felt comfortable with the idea of adult development. She knew there would be future stages and transitions, and the normalcy of that fact gave her a new security. She realized now that she could wholeheartedly renew her vows to teaching.

Conclusion

We have described stresses which accompany two of the major developmental transitions in a teaching career, and have shown how stress was alleviated for two teachers who learned about the stages of a teaching career and reflected on their own careers. Of course, reflecting on one's career will not alter the many stressful conditions of teaching, but understanding one's own development may lead to a greater acceptance of the unchanging conditions of teaching and an increased vigor to work toward the possible changes. There is vast potential for growth when teachers analyze transitions in the context of knowledge about teacher career development.

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